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Rebuilding Social Connections (After the Pandemic Ends)

For many people, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted social life, preventing or restricting in-person time with friends. As the recommendations for social distancing extended from weeks to months, many people have become used to the habits of isolation.

As more people get vaccinated, the risk of serious illness from COVID-19 will go down, and in-person interactions will become safer. Depending on where you live and how far along vaccinations are progressing, society may be in various stages of reopening for good.

Some people will easily and gladly resume their former social lives, perhaps with an even greater appreciation of time spent with friends. For others, the habits of social isolation may be harder to change. Fear of infection may linger, making in-person interactions less comfortable, and the easy give-and-take of social life may not come as easily after so much time alone.

Because friendships and supportive relationships are so important to your wellbeing and health, it's worth making the effort to push yourself past any initial hesitancy to resume social life. You'll want to do that safely, paying close attention to health risks. You may be more comfortable doing it gradually, noting your feelings and reactions as you spend more time with other people. Make an effort, too, to kindly and safely draw out friends who continue to isolate themselves.

The experience of emerging from isolation after a pandemic is new, but many people have had related experiences—after silent retreats, extended illness, the end of abusive relationships, or recovery from addiction, for example. Some of what has been learned from those transitions can be applied to this situation.

Here are some considerations as you take steps to rebuild social connections:

- **Online and in-person connections are not the same.** It's easy to create and hide behind an online persona without revealing your true emotional ups and downs. Extended face-to-face time with friends is a much better forum for real connection and sharing. As you begin to shift from purely online connections to more in-person socializing, take advantage of that difference. With no video lag time, it will be easier to talk in person. And with a full read of body language, expressions, and voice tones, it will be easier to connect emotionally.
- **Be compassionate and patient—with yourself and with others.** Not everyone will be comfortable resuming social life at the same pace. You or some of your friends may feel shy and awkward at first or find social interactions exhausting. That's normal. Don't push too hard or too fast. Give it time, but don't give up either. Keep going, step-by-step, until you become more comfortable together.
- **Think back to your relationships before the pandemic.** What did you value about them? What made you uncomfortable? In which relationships did you listen to and support each other? Which friends seem to have your best interest at heart? Which friends lifted your spirits, and which left you drained of energy? As you resume your social connections, start with your most valued and mutually supportive friendships.
- **Be brave and resist fear.** It can be scary to reach out and reconnect, especially if you're worried about being awkward, embarrassing yourself, or being rejected. Be brave. Push yourself past those initial worries. Accept that you might feel uncomfortable with other people at first. Recognize that everyone makes mistakes at times. It's OK to stumble in your social interactions. It's part of being human. Good friends will appreciate you for who you are. If the first people you try to connect with don't have time or aren't ready yet, wait a bit and try again.

- **Counter negative thoughts with positive reframing.** If you hit roadblocks in your efforts to rebuild social connections, take a step back, and consider whether they are real or imagined. Are you reading too much into someone's slow response to your invitation? Might they be genuinely busy with a work crunch, young children, or care for an aging parent rather than avoiding you? Think of positive explanations for what you're observing. Challenge your negative and unrealistic thoughts.
- **Be vulnerable.** It's tempting to keep defensive armor up and present an appearance of emotional strength and steady happiness. However, if that's not the real you, you're wasting the opportunity and value of social connections. Of course, you don't want to unload all of your unhappiness in an initial get-together. Think how you'd react if your friends did that. Work up gradually from easy talk about work, movies, or sports, to more meaningful topics that involve sharing feelings. Don't be afraid to ask for help from a friend, and be willing to give help when needed.
- **Join a local organization or volunteer as a way to expand your circle of friends.** Keep in mind that it takes time and repeated exposure for friendships to develop. Someone you meet once or twice might seem to have little in common with you. However, work with them for a few months as a volunteer and a friendship may take root.

Source: Morgan, H. (2021, February 12). *Rebuilding social connections (after the pandemic ends)* (B. Schuette & C. Gregg-Meeker, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: *Workplace Options*.

Keeping on Track at Work When Vacation Is on Your Mind

It's important to plan time off, even if it's just a short break.

Perhaps if you could pitch a beach umbrella in the middle of the office, it would help you feel better about spending the summer behind your desk. Everyone, it seems, is on vacation. Everyone except you.

So how can you keep your nose to the grindstone when your mind is in a beach chair at the water's edge contemplating nothing more challenging than a foamy drink and a frothy novel? Kenneth W. Thomas suggests you start that mental journey with baby steps. "Keep track of every milestone you reach at work, even the small ones," said Thomas, professor of management at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. "You can even make a little chart and color it in as you go."

The author of the book *Intrinsic Motivation at Work: Building Energy and Commitment*, Thomas said the ache for a break could be a symptom of an ailing attitude. "This is the time to sit in a dark room for a while and figure out your passions," he said. "People are more likely to stay on track at work if they come up with a solution that gives them a feeling of choice."

Some people will discover the need to take a permanent break from their jobs, he said. But most workers can refocus their energies and learn to overcome the compulsion to dash home and start tossing scuba gear in the suitcase.

The most effective choice, Thomas said, is to commit to a can-do attitude. Here are tips on remaining sunny when it seems as if everyone else is at the beach:

- Start building a positive vocabulary in your thoughts and comments about work. Job motivation expert Kenneth W. Thomas suggests beginning with the word "progress."

- Reward yourself for milestones. For example, leave the building and take a short, pleasant walk after completing an important task.
- Become the architect of your own success by building time off into your schedule. Gerald Lewis, a psychologist who specializes in workplaces issues, recommends negotiating for compensatory time and adding an extra day or two to already-lengthened holiday weekends. “And if you really must have more time, consider giving up pay in exchange for extra vacation,” he said.
- Don’t eat lunch at your desk. Utilize that time constructively by taking a break from the workplace.
- Plan a mini outing either on the way to work or on the way home. For example, pick up a sandwich after work, and stop at a park for a weekday picnic.
- Reassess your goals. If you yearn for a vacation, perhaps it is because you no longer enjoy your job. Think about what once made you passionate about your work—and see if that reignites the fire.

“Get a positive vocabulary, starting with the word progress,” Thomas said. “And when you make progress, reward yourself by doing something special.”

Edward Maher, a florist from Voorhees, New Jersey, motivates himself with a carrot-and-stick approach. Work is the stick—and vacation is the carrot. “When I’m having a really bad day at work, I think, ‘That’s OK, I’m going away,’ “ he said. “It’s easier to finish whatever the job is when I know I have an exciting trip to look forward to.”

That technique is only effective for people who have logged a vacation in their datebook—and know there is light at the end of the work tunnel. “It’s essential that people plan for time off,” said Gerald Lewis, a psychologist and director of Gerald Lewis Ph.D. & Associates, a behavioral health practice in Framingham, Massachusetts.

Maher takes at least a week off every six months, usually a vacation requiring travel. He is getting ready for a trip to Las Vegas—and already is making arrangements for the vacation after that—a tour of France.

But Lewis said setting aside as little time as a long weekend can be emotionally uplifting because the worker knows some kind of respite is on the horizon.

Weekend Vacations

Indeed, the weekend vacation is gaining popularity in the United States, according to the Travel Industry Association of America. Heavy work schedules make it tough to carve out a full week or two for vacation, so harried workers compromise by taking several briefer trips throughout the year, the trade group’s William S. Norman said.

Frustrated Americans who feel they simply don’t get enough time off may look enviously across the Atlantic. Most Americans haven’t taken an entire summer off from work since they were teenagers, while Europeans typically take a month-long respite during the warm weather to recharge their batteries.

“We are a workaholic nation,” Lewis said. We are also a nation in which workers are increasingly responsible for keeping themselves on track. That means most folks are faced with the daunting task of maintaining their own focus when they would rather be hopping a plane.

“In the command-and-control era, things were spelled out as far as what people were supposed to be doing at work,” Thomas said. “Today, people are far more self-managed.”

Workers who are well-organized can make the trend toward self-management work in their favor by finishing projects early so they can get a jump on vacation. Other relaxation-friendly options include establishing flexible hours in summer or working from home a few days a week.

Summer’s longer days also naturally provide opportunities for refreshment before and after work. In fact, Lewis points out, it’s healthier to be outdoors in the early morning and early evening because they’re typically the coolest hours of the day and the sun’s harmful ultraviolet rays aren’t as strong.

You're far more likely to take advantage of opportunities to relax if you're prepared to seize the day. Lewis suggests stowing a lawn chair in the trunk of the car for impromptu breaks. "On your way home from work, stop and sit some place restful and scenic," he said.

Increasingly, employers are acknowledging workers' yearning to be free during the vacation season. For example, the advertising firm E. James White Co. in suburban Washington, DC, offers its staff unlimited M&M candies during the summer months—along with company happy hours and parking lot barbecues.

Many companies are shortening hours on Fridays and relaxing dress codes. Lewis points out that all workers have to power to grant themselves a brief respite from their labors by resisting the temptation to bring the job home with them at the end of the day.

When you leave work, leave work," he said. "It will all be there tomorrow."

Source: Smith, E. (Revised 2021). Keeping on track at work, with vacation on your mind. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

Back-to-School Tips for Teachers and Parents

Back-to-school time can be both exciting and stressful for parents and teachers alike. Getting ready for the first day of classes is an arduous effort. Check out these tips to help make this year's back-to-school time easier:

- **Schedule time with teachers.** Keep an open dialogue with school staff to help your children thrive.
- **Get those shots.** Some schools require immunization records for entry. Find out if your child needs any vaccines before school starts.
- **Ease into the school routine.** A good night's sleep is key to a successful school day. Preschoolers need 11–12 hours of sleep a night, and school-age children need at least 10 hours, while teens need 9-10 hours.
- **Pack a healthy and safe lunch.** Choose a balanced meal for your children's lunchbox, and make sure you keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Low-income families may qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.
- **Shop smart.** Some states have sales-tax holidays in August. Make a list, know what you need, and shop the sales. Knowing where the bargains are will help you save.
- **Talk to your kids about online safety.** Identity theft, cyberbullying, or inappropriate behavior that can happen online. Teach your children about online safety as they use social media to connect with old and new friends at school.
- **Plan and practice how to get to school.** If your kids' school or school system provides bus transportation, find the nearest stop to your home and the pickup and drop-off times. Teach your kids to be safe whether by car, bus, bicycle, or walking.
- **Teach time management.** Leisure time, sports, and "screen time" can interfere with homework. Keep your family's schedule on time with these tips.
- **Make sure kids are insured.** Your child could qualify for free or low-cost insurance through Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).
- **Listen to your kids.** Anxiety and nerves can take over, so provide a safe environment at home and in the classroom. Talk to kids about bullying and what to do if they encounter it.
- **Get tax credits on tuition.** Check out these IRS tips to see what kind of tax credits you can get based on the price of education: <https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/back-to-school-learn-about-tax-credits-for-education>.
- **Browse lesson plans for teachers.** See all the free lesson plans that USA.gov has to offer: <https://www.usa.gov/lesson-plans>.
- **Watch career spotlight videos.** Have students who are curious about future career paths? Look up some career spotlight videos to show them.
- **Learn money management.** No student wants to interrupt his or her education because of financial troubles. Get age-appropriate checklists to help students manage finances while in elementary school, high school, or college.

Source: USA.gov. (2016, August 8). Back-to-school guide for teachers and parents. Retrieved January 3, 2018, from <https://www.usa.gov/>

Building Self-Esteem in Children Through Effective Praise

Children are often compared to sponges, in that they absorb and learn about the world around them through interactions with others, particularly those in caregiving roles. As an adult figure or caregiver in a child's life, your interactions with a child may help to foster their personal growth and a sense of self.

Self-esteem can be thought of as a lot of interconnected factors that lead to an individual's inner confidence and self-identity. As an adult or caregiver, you can help to promote positive self-esteem growth in a child through celebrating differences, fostering open communication, and showing that you love and appreciate one another.

One way that you can foster positive self-esteem growth during childhood is through effectively praising a child for their exploration or achievements. Effective praise names the action that is the reason for your praise and helps the child better understand what it is that they did well.

An example of effective praise would be saying, "Wow, you did such an amazing job by continuing to try new ways to build your tower, even after it fell over. I'm very proud of your problem solving."

Recognizing the exact action or reason why you are praising a child can also encourage repetition of their behavior over time. This also encourages children to feel better about themselves by clearly encouraging their efforts and building the belief that through hard work they may achieve or build upon a skill.

This is a concept based off of work by psychologist Carol Dweck, and it is called a growth mindset. A growth mindset can also be described as having a belief that through learning and practice one can learn new skills and achieve.

In contrast to growth mindsets, Dweck has described fixed mindsets as a state of believing that your skills or abilities will not change regardless of effort. Ineffective praise may contribute to a fixed mindset or may make positive behavior repetition unlikely if it is not clear what is considered good behavior in that context.

Examples of less effective praise would be, "You're so smart," or "Good Job!"

Taking the time to think about how you talk to a child and making small changes like using more effective praise can help to build self-esteem in children and foster healthy social and emotional development.

Source: Thornborrow, K. (2020, January 29). Building self-esteem in children through effective praise. Grafenwoehr, Germany: U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), U.S. Army. Retrieved June 16, 2021, from <https://www.army.mil>